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ABSTRACT

This study gathered information on the extent to which children participate in the mature routines of their community, and the extent to which elders participate in child-centered activities. Subjects were children ranging in age from 30 to 45 months from the four societies of: (1) Mayan Indians living in a rural Guatemalan town; (2) the Efe living in the Ituri rainforest of northeastern Zaire; and (3) urban middle-class communities in Boston and Salt Lake City. Researchers visited 12 families from each of the 4 communities and monitored children's conversations and conversations of others held within the child's hearing. Findings showed that Efe and Mayan children had many opportunities to observe and participate in adult economic activities. Adults in United States communities were more likely to use lessons to teach children about the world around them and more likely to be partners in play than Efe or Mayan adults. Findings suggest that when children take part in the mature practices of their community, the skills and social customs valued by the community are readily available to them; in communities where most economic activity goes on outside of the home and neighborhood, children's experience with the mature practices of their community is limited. (HOD)

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Cultural Variation in Young Children's Opportunities for Involvement in Adult Activities

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Poster presented at the American Anthropology Association Meetings. San Francisco, 1992.

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Introduction

We report findings comparing young children's opportunities for involvement in mature activities in several middle-class Western and nonWestern communities. We knew from our own research and from other ethnographies that in many nonWestern communities children are part of adult everyday life, learning valued skills through observing and participating in the practices of their elders. The lessons children receive that are intended to teach skills occur in the context of ongoing activities, not separate from them. By comparison, we believe that in societies with complex technologies and a history of schooling, children may be more likely to spend long periods of time segregated from adults and their social and work routines. Adults frequently enter into children's activities like play, contrasting with the observation in nonWestern communities of children entering into adult activities like work.

To give you a sense of the variation in the arrangement of children's day-to-day activities in Western and nonWestern communities, we would like to describe two scenes that contrast children participating in adult activities versus adults interacting with children in child activities.

> It is 2:00 in the afternoon in northeastern Zaïre, and Kpendule, a young forager girl, draws a knife along the length of a green banana and, with a little less skill than her older sister, removes the skin. She looks around and notices that her mother and aunts are busy chopping fire wood at the edge of the camp. Kpendule is too hungry to wait for her mother, and decides to cook the plantain herself. Scavenging some dry twigs from around the camp, she places them on the embers of last night's fire, and blows on them gently until they burst into flames. She rummages in her grandmother's hut for a pot, that she fills with water and places on the fire. Her uncle gives her some leaves that she ties securely around the pot to make a lid. As the water rises to a boil, Kpendule hears her father and brothers returning from the forest. She leaves her meal cooking, and goes over to see what food they brought home for her.
>
> At the same time, some eight thousand miles away, Suzie, a young child sits alone in her bedroom playing with her new coloring set. Suzie likes to color with her brother, but he is at school and will not be home until the afternoon. She picks up the tiny sized crayons, tucks them into their carrying case, and goes into the living room to look for her mom. Suzie complains that she is bored, and asks her mother to play with her. Suzie's mom interrupts her telephone conversation to tell Suzie that as soon as she is off the phone they can play together with her new toy.

Although the ethnographic record suggests that children in many nonWestern societies are involved in the mature practices of their community, little information is available on middle-class U.S. children. In this study we examined cultural variation in children's involvement with their elders by gathering systematic information on the extent to which children participate in the mature routines of their community, and on the extent to which elders participate in child-centered activities. Our thesis is that in communities where

children are segregated from mature activities, adult-child interactions are more likely to occur in the context of children's activities.

Methods

For our study we selected children ranging in age from 30- to 45-months from four societies varying in technology and schooling. The Efe (commonly referred to as pygmies), are a foraging society living in the Ituri rainforest of northeastern Zaïre. Most of the materials they use to make a living (e.g. bows, arrows) are obtained from the forest, and most of the tools they craft from these materials are made in the camp. The Efe are neither schooled nor literate. Recent attempts to establish schools in the area have been at best sporadic, and have often failed.

The Mayan Indians we observed live in San Pedro La Laguna, a rural Guatemalan town. They are a modernizing community, whose form of living was traditionally based on agriculture. Schools are available in San Pedro, but they are not as widespread compared to U.S. communities. Mayan mothers in our study had about one year of education, fathers about 3 years.

The U.S. children participating in the study are from two, urban middle-class communities - Boston located in eastern U.S. and Salt Lake City located in southwestern U.S. All U.S. mothers and fathers had at least a high school education.

We decided to watch children from the time they woke-up until the time they went to sleep in order to obtain information about children's participation in the mature practices of their community. To do this, we visited 12 families from each of the 4 communities on 3 separate occasions so that morning, afternoon and evening times were sampled. Each visit lasted 4 to 5 hours. During a visit, the child was followed wherever he or she went, whether that meant going shopping, farming or foraging, and whether that meant staying in the child's home or attending daycare. Children's activities were recorded every six minutes, using a modified version of 'spot' observations. Starting on the 6th minute, we watched the child for 20 seconds recording selected activities. We continued to watch children during non-scheduled observation times because we found that this information was useful in making coding decisions.

Conversations with the child as well as conversations within the child's hearing range were monitored with the aid of a small, wireless microphone that all children wore.

Two local woman, one fluent in Mayan and Spanish (from San Pedro) and the other fluent in KiEfe and Swahili (from the Ituri Forest) assisted with the project.

The activities we report on are a subset of the data collected from this study and were chosen because they allowed us to address the questions related to our interests. The first question we asked relates to children's participation in the mature practices of their community. To examine this question we chose two activities: work and play at work.

> *Work* - defined as any activity typically intended to have some economic value, and usually (although not exclusively) done by adults. Included in this category are assigned errands.

Play at work-related themes - defined as any activity clearly seen as falling within the realm of adult or mature work. Examples of this category include emulating aspects of adult work such as cooking, shopping, driving a car, shooting an animal, or making a tortilla.

The second question we asked relates to adults' participation in child activities. To examine this question we also chose two activities: lessons and adults as partners in play.

Lessons - defined as an any activity focused on teaching the child work, interpersonal or scholastic skills, or teaching the child about nature or the spiritual world. To be coded as 'lesson', the observer had to be able to identify the curriculum, although the curriculum did not have to be made explicit to the child.

Adults as partners in play - defined as when at least one adult was coded as a partner in play.

Significance testing was done using one-way analyses of variance. The differences we report are statistically significant at $p \leq .05$.

Findings

We start by examining children's participation in the work routines of their community. Figure 1 contains two pieces of information for each of the 4 communities. The first piece of information tells us how often (measured by the proportion of scans) work was available to the child. Work was coded as available if it was within easy ear- or eye-shot of the child. The second piece of information tells us how often (once again measured by the proportion of scans) children participated in available activities. We see that Efe forager and Mayan San Pedro children were more likely to have work available to them than U.S. middle-class children. Furthermore, Efe forager children spent more of their time working (about 30%) than children of all of the other communities.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of scans that children were observed playing at work-related themes. Efe forager and Mayan San Pedro children often played at work, significantly more so than the children in the 2 Western communities.

We now turn our attention to examining the second question, adults' involvement in child-oriented activities by first looking at lessons. What we see in Figure 3 is that lessons were more likely to be available to U.S. children, and U.S. children were more likely to be observed participating in lessons than children from either the Mayan or forager community.

We next see, as speculated, that U.S. adults often play with their children, adult-child play occurring in about 40% of the scans (Figure 4). In contrast, children from the two nonWestern communities had adults as play partners less than 20% of the time. This finding distinguished U.S. children from Efe forager and San Pedro children.

Discussion

The findings of our study show that there exits cultural variation in the extent to which children are involved in the mature practices of their community. Efe forager and Mayan children had many opportunities to observe and participate in adult economic activities. Even when children were not participating in work, their experiences with work continued in the form of play. As anticipated, adults in the two U.S. middle-class communities were more likely to teach their children about the physical and social world using lessons, and were more likely to play with their children. How can we understand the pattern of findings described?

In communities where children take part in the mature practices of their community, the skills and social customs valued by the community are readily available to them. Children enter into ongoing activities as apprentices, their roles as observers and participators. Adults rarely need to assume the role of teacher since learning for the child occurs in the context of the activity, not separate from it. In these communities, teaching and learning do not have to occur in institutionalized settings like schools.

In communities where most economic activity goes on outside of the home and neighborhood, children's experience with the mature practices of their community is limited. This is because children do not typically visit the work place of their elders. Children's experience with domestic household work may not be extensive because technologies make this work less labor and time intensive. Adults from middle-class Western communities may therefore have to assume the role of teacher, guiding children's learning of valued mature economic and social skills that are not regularly available to them. Since the teaching and learning of skills typically occur in settings that are separate from their use, adults may have to rely on many of the pedagogic techniques found in schools. To help children make sense of the mature roles that they are expected to assume, it may be necessary for adults to present information in specialized forms such as lessons, and to enter into children's activities such as play. Play may be important for several reasons. Middle-class adults' play with children, for example, often involves elements of teaching.

In summary, the findings we report support ethnographic accounts of nonWestern children's participation with adults and their activities, and confirms the more antidotal accounts of U.S. adults entering into child activities.

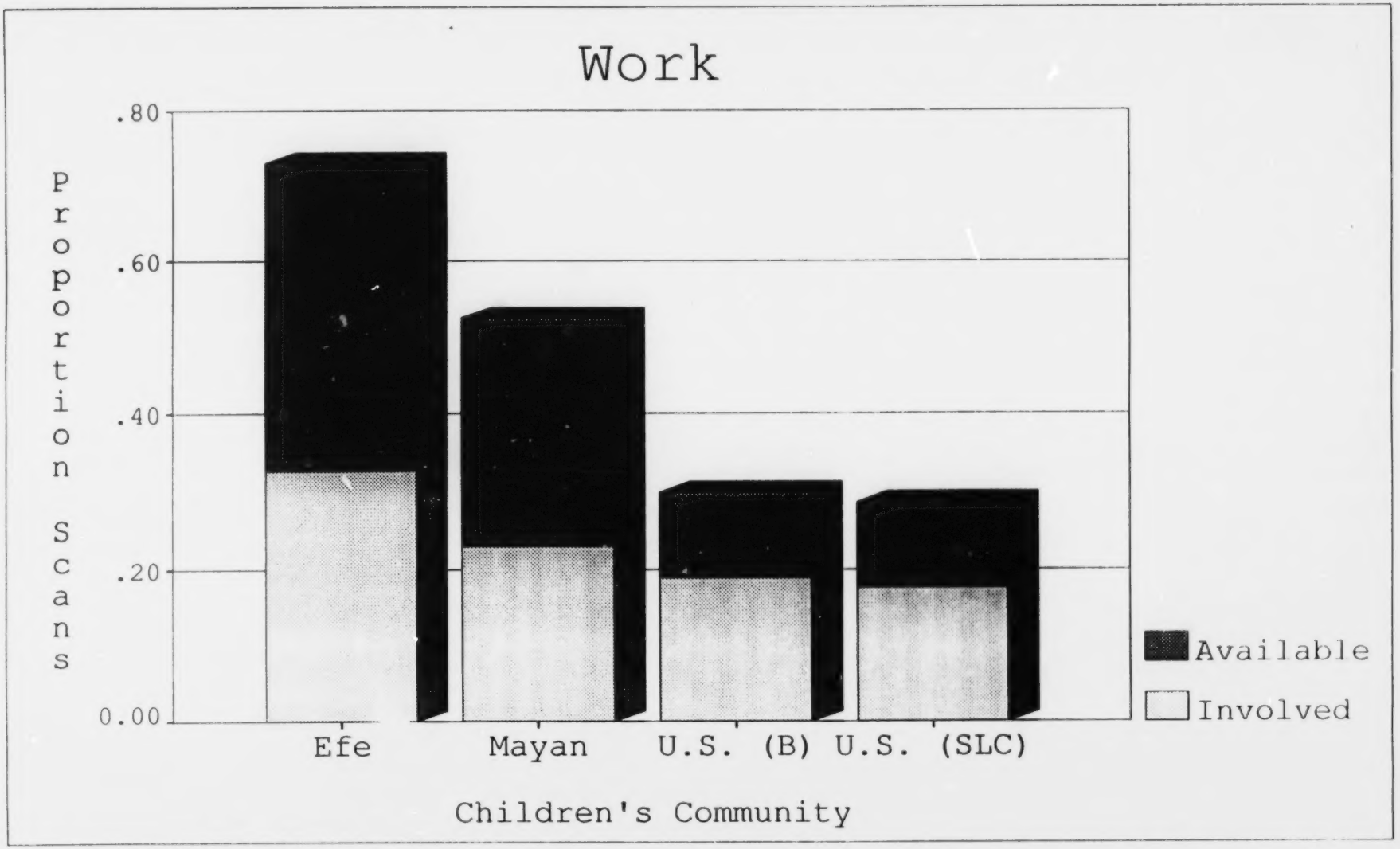
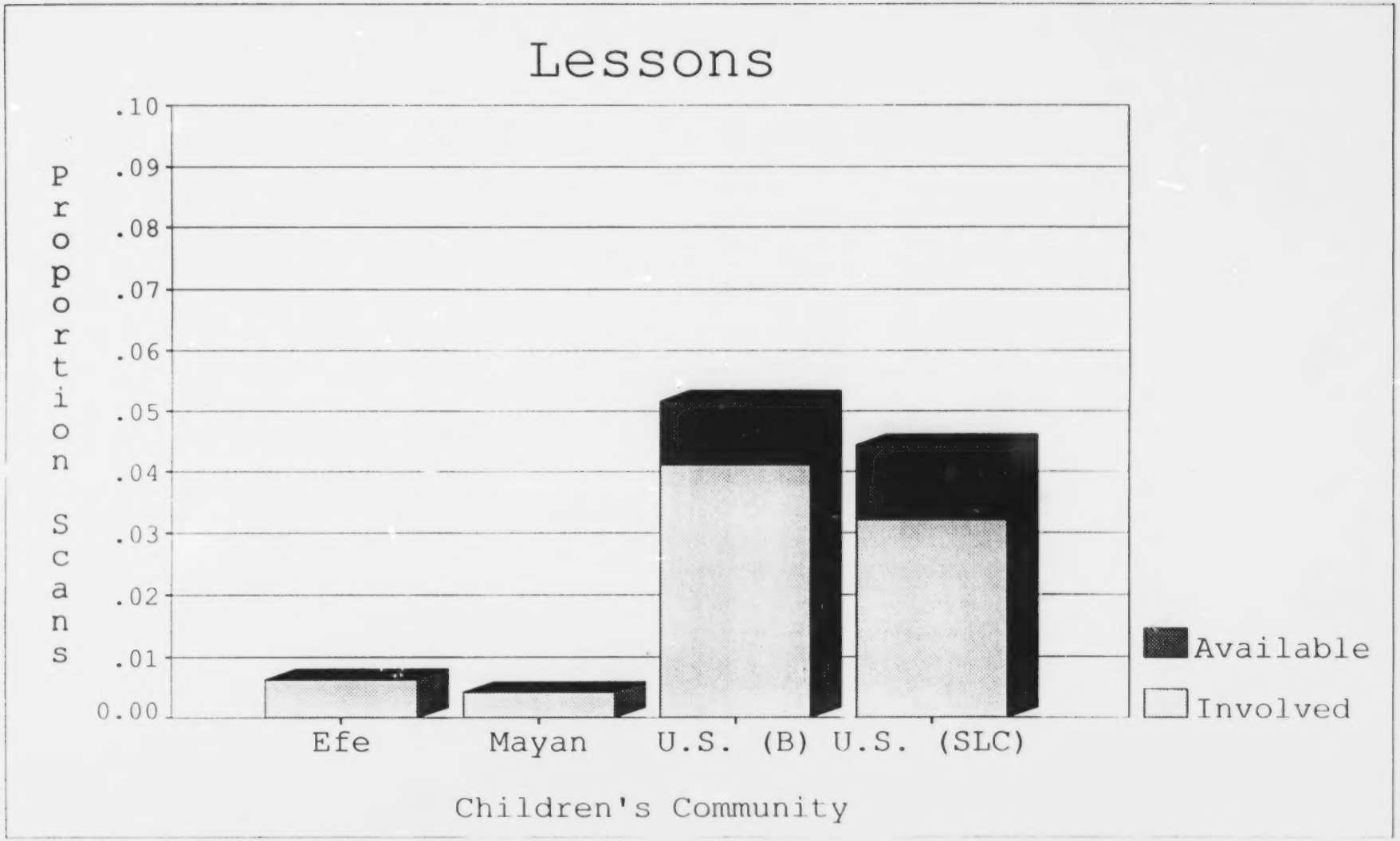

Work
.80
.60
.40
.20
0.00
Proportion Scans
Efe
Mayan
U.S. (B)
U.S. (SLC)
Children's Community
Available
Involved

Fig. 1

Play at Work-related Themes
Proportion of Play
.4
.3
.2
.1
0.0
Efe
Mayan
U.S.(B)
U.S.(SLC)
Children's Community

Fig. 2.


Lessons
.10
.09
.08
.07
.06
.05
.04
.03
.02
.01
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proportion Scans
Efe
Mayan
U.S. (B)
U.S. (SLC)
Children's Community
Available
Involved

Fig. 3

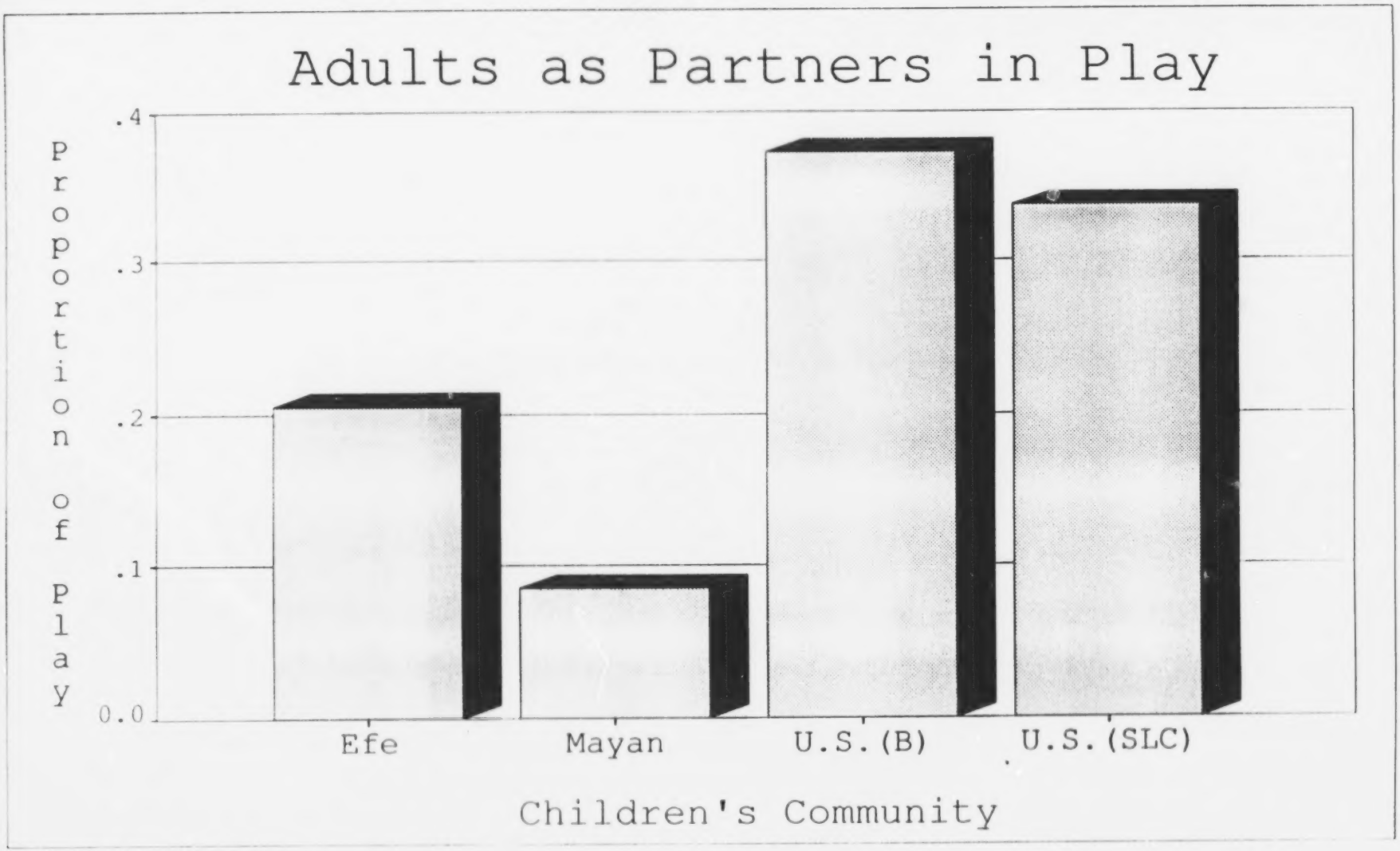
Adults as Partners in Play
Proportion of Play
.4
.3
.2
.1
0.0
Efe
Mayan
U.S.(B)
U.S.(SLC)
Children's Community

Fig. ..